



# Am I not good *enough?*

Minority students in college open up about impostor syndrome and feeling inadequate, unworthy

Story by Bryanna Bartlett • Assistant News Editor  
Illustration by Marci Suela • Lifestyle Editor

“Are you supposed to be in this class?” Ifeanyi Ebochie was asked this when he was taking a science class at City College of San Francisco (CCSF) in Fall 2016.

This wasn't the first time a professor told him he “didn't belong here.”

Ebochie, who studied microbiology at CCSF for two years, said at the time, he didn't realize he was experienc-

ing impostor syndrome as a Nigerian and African American student. Those feelings did not dissipate when he transferred to San Jose State in 2017.

“When I got to campus, I knew immediately I was going to have to work four times as hard, go to office hours more . . . to be noticed or to get my paper actually graded,” Ebochie said.

He said it didn't help that professors would “misgrade” or “lose” his tests. The first time a professor at SJSU lost his test was in Fall 2018.

“Those things made me feel as if I didn't matter,” Ebochie said. “I'd think, ‘did my work not matter? Did I do well and [the professor dropped] my grade below anyways?’”

The feeling of being an impostor never left Ebochie's mind as he continued to take science classes at SJSU. He switched his major to justice studies in 2019 after deciding the science department wasn't for him.

Ebochie said that while becoming a physician's assistant is still a part of his career plan, he's planning to graduate from SJSU this spring with a justice studies degree before enrolling at the University of California, San Francisco to complete a microbiology degree.

“Race plays a role in it . . . I've met other Black people [at SJSU] who are shining stars [in the classroom] but professors still undermine them,” he said. “Our work is always under-appreciated.”

Ebochie said impostor syndrome is always in the back of his mind.

Impostor syndrome is typically defined as feeling inadequate, despite an individual's evident success.

SJSU psychology lecturer Neelam Rattan said it feels like perceived fraudulence.

“The person feels that they may be exposed, that they're not as worthy as

they think they are,” Rattan said. “That finally, people will find out that he or she is not really intelligent or competent or capable or high achieving and their mask will be taken off their face.”

## Prevalence in minority communities

In 2017, the University of Texas published a study on the relationship between impostor syndrome, psychological distress and perceived discrimination among ethnic minority students. Perceived discrimination means discrimination based on the perception that an individual is a member of a federally protected group including race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age or disability.

Out of 322 African American, Asian American, Latinx and other ethnic minority students at UT Austin, about 70% said they experienced impostor syndrome at one point.

Kevin Cokley, the director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis at UT and one of the authors of the impostor syndrome study, conveyed the syndrome's significance in the study.

Cokley and his colleagues said mental health professionals should routinely include impostor syndrome and perceived discrimination in their mental health assessments, according to an April 5, 2017 UT News article.

He said this could possibly help ethnic minority students overcome discriminatory experiences.

“Unlike white students who may experience impostorism, I believe that the ethnic minority student experience of impostorism is often racialized because ethnic minority students are aware of the stereotypes about intelligence that exist about their racial/ethnic groups,” Cokley said in the article.

Researchers found that the impact of impostorism differs in each ethnic minority student population. Among African American students, impostor feelings were an indicator of anxiety and worsened the impact of perceived discrimination on depression, according to the article.

Rattan said that impostor syndrome is a “multifaceted term,” meaning it has many features and perspectives that people need to consider.

She said for marginalized students,

indicators of impostor syndrome could include: family dynamics, parenting, educational environments, high levels of saviorism, anxiety, procrastination and fear. Other indicators are low levels of social skills and mindfulness. According to Rattan, saviorism is a person's hope that someone will come in to do the work for them.

She said these reasons are just the “tip of the iceberg” in understanding the syndrome.

“It is not simple to say this is impostor syndrome [or] this is an impostor right there because true mis-

identification comes from self-criticism,” Rattan said. “When we are not accepted by the people around us . . . we will have self-criticism, we will feel a loss of belongingness [and] we will feel depersonalized.”

Similar to Ebochie, SJSU communications junior Jazmin Williams said she didn't know that when she was living in her hometown, which she didn't feel comfortable revealing, she was experiencing impostor syndrome.

“When I was in a predominantly white environment, that is when I definitely did experience impostor syndrome, 100%,” Jazmin Williams said. “I was always the only Black person in class and I was scared to express my opinion . . . I was scared to express anything, my likes, my dislikes.”

Jazmin Williams said most of the time she feels like her experiences are connected to race, which she doesn't want to be the only thing that defines her.

But she said being Black is an immense part of her life and most of her experiences are connected to race.

“I feel like when I'm in discussions [in class] and I have to expand on my experiences, it always feels like I'm pulling the race card and it feels uncomfortable,” she said. “Being [at SJSU], I feel more comfortable

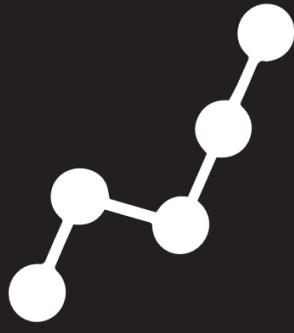
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**Jazmin Williams**  
communications junior

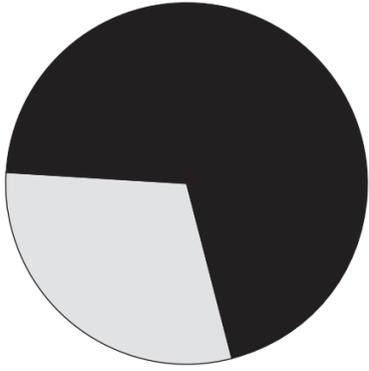
## Indicators:

- Family dynamics, parenting and educational environments
- High levels of saviorism, anxiety, procrastination and fear
- Low levels of social skills and mindfulness



## Symptoms include:

- Feeling inadequate despite any evident success
- Feeling like you don't belong
- Not feeling intelligent, capable or high achieving
- Lack of confidence
- Depersonalization



**70%**

of African American, Asian American, Latinx and other minorities said they experienced impostor syndrome at one point, according to a 2017 study of University of Texas ethnic minority students.



## How to overcome:

- Acknowledge impostor syndrome as a psychological pattern
- Seek encouragement, motivation and guidance in the form of mentorship
- Find a community

INFOGRAPHIC BY BRYANNA BARTLETT & MARCI SUELA; SOURCES: PSYCHOLOGY LECTURER NEELAM RATTAN, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS JOURNAL OF COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

## DOUBT

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expressing myself and voicing my thoughts.”

Black students make up 3.3% of SJSU’s student body, which is about 1,200 students out of approximately 36,000, according to the SJSU Office of Institutional Research.

Jazmin Williams said now that she’s at SJSU, she feels secure enough to express her opinions because she is surrounded by more diverse students and faculty members. She said she doesn’t feel like what she has to say will be attributed to her race anymore.

### A problematic term

With so many people saying they are experiencing impostor syndrome, SJSU Chicana and Chicano studies professor Julia Curry said she believes it’s an overused and problematic term.

“I don’t use the term at all . . . Partly because I think it is too easy for institutions or higher educators to deploy terminology that justifies why people fail,” Curry said.

She said having bad teachers should not define whether you are a good student and that students should step out of their comfort zone, even when they are fearful, unconfident or doubtful.

“What if you were taught that nothing that you say has meaning?” Curry said. “Nothing that you do can contribute? So then we are self-defeating but only because we were taught so.”

She also said sometimes higher education institutions or authority figures determine who we are and what we’re about, by using terms like impostor syndrome, implicit bias or under-represented minorities, otherwise known as URM. Implicit bias is one’s

understanding of a person affected by stereotypes.

“There is nothing more dehumanizing than to be called an URM,” Curry said. She said these terms shrink people down to statistics.

“It is very important for all of us to consider: How can we move away from these analytical concepts that are important for us to use while we’re studying, and then come back to the core of being human?” Curry said.

However, SJSU marketing sophomore Samar Mohamed said over Zoom that establishing impostor syndrome as a term comforts people.

“I think it validates feelings instead,” Mohamed said. “When people know that this is a term, this is something common, they feel kind of protected . . . they feel like they have places they can go to overcome it.”

Mohamed, who serves as the Black Honors Society activities and events coordinator, said because the Black population at SJSU is only 3.3%, there’s Black students who might feel, “out of place just attending class.”

To showcase people in the workforce at different levels of their career who can also feel out of place, the BHS held a discussion panel over Zoom with Black professionals about impostor syndrome on Sept. 10.

### Mentorship fosters motivation, success

Diane Tucker, EduTech CEO and director of education, emphasized during the panel that students battling impostor syndrome need encouragement, motivation and guidance.

“I think the thing that tends to stop minority communities from [being a part of a certain occupation] is not having the ability to have that mentorship,” Tucker said. “Even though they may

go to school and major in those areas.”

She said career fields don’t necessarily need to be made more acceptable for people of different backgrounds, but minority communities need mentorship.

Denesia Webb, an SJSU communications junior and BHS outreach coordinator, said over Zoom that students battling impostor syndrome need to realize they have talent and ideas that the world needs. But she said they feel like they’re not good enough, they don’t trust their own instincts or they doubt their own talents, which is a loss for them and for people who would benefit from what those students have to offer.

Curry commended the African American/Black Student Success Center and the Chicana/Latinx Success Center and believes the centers play important roles for SJSU students.

She said it’s important for students to find spaces of their own.

“Everybody wants a place where they feel like they belong,” Curry said. “It is so important to teach students that every space can be theirs, that they can go into it and make their presence known.”

Jahmal Williams is the program director of the African American/Black Student Success Center, though he will assume a new role Oct. 26 as SJSU’s director of advocacy for racial justice.

Jahmal Williams, no relation to Jazmin Williams, said he emphasized relationships and mentorships with students at the center. He hopes this offers the students guidance and awareness because at the end of the day, he cares about their best interest, success and time at SJSU, even after they graduate.

Jahmal Williams said that when people grow up as part of any kind of marginalized



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**Samar Mohamed**  
marketing sophomore

population that faces threats of racism and oppression, it helps to have professors within that same background as a visually-noticeable common link.

However, he said that is not the main criteria when connecting with professors or other mentors.

“I believe you can find mentors’ support or guidance from anybody. There’s no specific look or feel or orientation,” Jahmal Williams said.

Despite what Jahmal Williams said, Ebochie said if he had a Black professor, it would have made a sizable difference in his college experience and he might not have experienced impostor syndrome.

“Teachers of the minority group are more likely to pay attention to each student,” Ebochie said.

Curry agreed with Jahmal Williams and said race alone does not provide good mentorship, because people of different genders and ethnicities can be just as good at mentoring and helping students believe in their success.

“There are some people who transcend race, who are such good educators because they inspire, because of the way they comport themselves,” Curry said. “Maybe it is going back to the essential piece of what it is to be human.”

Jazmin Williams said she was excited at first to be under the tutelage of a

Black professor at SJSU because she thought she could finally express herself in class.

“There’s something about learning from someone who looks like you that just makes it exciting,” she said. “But when I met that professor, I thought ‘I don’t know if I should continue to take Black professors.’”

Jazmin said the professor didn’t push or connect with her at all, which is when she realized race doesn’t matter much when looking for a mentor.

“I think in general, a lot of people don’t want to embrace who they are and what their culture is, which is sad,” she said. “There is so much to be proud about. It’s a problem in itself, everybody should be proud of who they are.”

### Recognizing your own potential

Edil Yousuf, a health care professional and DNP student at Stanford Health Care, said during the panel that she struggled to find a mentor throughout her entire career until she started working at Stanford Health Care. A DNP is a practice-based doctorate degree in nursing.

Yousuf said it was a Black supervisor who took her under his wing and advocated for her.

“He showed me the ropes and pushed me to continue professionally with all my goals,” she said. “I’m really thankful for that . . . and I really amplify the

importance of mentorship.”

Jahmal Williams said one way students of color should look at impostor syndrome is to recognize they’ve been challenged before and call on those skills of resilience to overcome it.

“Overcoming things isn’t something new to us . . . Being resilient isn’t something new to us, we’ve been doing it since we were young,” Ebochie said.

Marketing sophomore Mohamed said everyone experiences impostor syndrome, and while they might experience it at different points in their life, they’ll continue to deal with the syndrome and must work continuously to overcome it.

“I think many people experience [impostor syndrome] but they don’t know,” Mohamed said. “They think it’s all in their head, but really it’s very widespread.”

Psychology lecturer Rattan said there needs to be more representation of ethnic minority communities and more ethnic psychologists writing books.

“We’re minorities thrown into an arena that is dominated by a certain class of people,” she said. “Even though we may be very well equipped, very well armed, the mightiest of us will seem smaller.”

Black Honors Society outreach coordinator Webb added that it’s important to spread awareness about impostor syndrome and its prevalence so people know that they have a community.

“There’s only so much that we can do as a university,” Webb said. “[Impostor syndrome] is in every country . . . in every status [and] in every community. We have to work within the circle that we’re in and then slowly expand that.”

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